



Inmates productive while behind bars

By Alex Davis 10/11/2013



LINCOLN -- Some inmates are turning over a new leaf and filling a need throughout the state of Illinois. Prisoners are now making street and traffic signs. It's part of a new law to make signs easier to read at night.

Illinois Correctional Industries' Sign Manufacturing Program restarted at Lincoln Correction Center in July after taking a three year hiatus due to budget cuts.

"I'm learning something out here while I'm spending my time," said LCC inmate Robert Bacon.

Soon after it restarted, 22-year old Bacon applied for one of the five coveted jobs.

"It's nice to be out here working and not sitting in there just letting the time do me. I'm actually out here doing something with myself. I'm bettering myself by learning a trade that I wouldn't of had the opportunity to learn," said Bacon.

Since they first began, the group has made 100 signs and are filling orders for hundreds more.

"There's something to do every day and it's teaching me lots of stuff I can use out in the world," said Bacon.

Throughout the month of October, workers are making Rock River Trail Route road signs. They'll grace the 320 mile long river in both Wisconsin and Illinois. They plan to fill an order of 75 by next month.

That job was passed along from the Illinois Department of Transportation. ICI officials hope that agency will continue to pass along work to them as communities and agencies try to comply with a new law to make signs brighter and easier to read.

"It's a perfect time for us to partner with these municipalities and communities, there's legislation that guides all of the units of government to upgrade their reflectivity of their signs," said ICI's Jen Aholt.

At the end of the day, Aholt and other Department of Corrections officials say it's a program with products inmates can be proud to be a part of.

"It's a great program. It's a modern program which is nice for our inmates. They are able to go out and talk about their graphic design skills, their ability to shoot screens, they are doing inventory. They're also identifying the latest products for legislation and just basic print shop management," said Aholt.

The group can make around 800 different street and highway signs and ICI sells them for around 10 to 20 percent less than other producers. As for the new 70-mile per hour speed limit signs, those will still be up to IDOT to handle.

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